FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS
John 21:15-19
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In the program notes for "Your Arms Are too Short to Box with God", the Black Gospel musical, Micki Grant, composer of the music and lyrics, discusses her own religious pilgrimage.

"Born again, dyed-in-the-wool Baptist" since the age of five, Miss Grant expressed her gratitude for all the "preachers and teachers, Mamas and Papas - who handed the story down for 2,000 years..." The staging of the story, she said, was inevitable because of the "unequivocal fascination the saga of the man from Nazareth has had for believers and nonbelievers alike over the centuries.."

At the center of it all is the man, this man, who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, lived in Galilee and died in Jerusalem. The man is not an abstraction. He is supremely "locatable" in history and geography. At the center is not a principle, but a person. There are choices to be made about how best to express it: from J. S. Bach's B minor Mass to the simplest Sunday School song; from the elegance of St. Paul's Cathedral on Easter morning to taking the sacrament to the patients in the geriatric wing; from the breathtaking selflessness of Mother Teresa to the decision not to cheat on a final exam. But at the center is the man. That is how it was for Peter. That is how it always shall be. And those of us who prefer our Gospel in complex sentences, encased in words like emperical and existential need the occasional reminder.

At a seminar on the relationship of the Gospel to the life of the nation I found myself deeply troubled by the complexity of our economic situation: pulled between concern for the poor and the need for a viable and responsible national economy. The topic invites passion and the leadership of the workshop was understandably partisan and sometimes angry. It was not easy going for anyone and it certainly wasn't pietistic in the usual sense of that word. On the last evening the leadership team assembled as a panel to discuss the matter of how individuals who are in ministry in this complex environment find that their own souls are fed. I was expecting, frankly, to be told that social activism, picketing, fasting, at least signing petitions, are good ways to feed one's soul. I was startled to hear one of the leaders - a strong, creative woman from New York City, deeply committed to social justice and social change - answer "I am fed by my personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ." It was a magnificent reminder that regardless of where we are ecclesiastically - High Church Anglican to Free Will Baptist; or politically - liberal to conservative; regardless of anything else, at the center is the man, and our coming to terms with him.

The other reminder was a delightful surprise. University of Chicago Theologian Joseph Sittler had delivered the Commencement Address at Trinity Lutheran Seminary here in Columbus last May. I was perusing the seminary's magazine and happened upon his picture and the fascinating title "The Haunting Allure of Jesus". Now Joe Sittler is a wonderful human being and a great theologian and his language skills are legendary. I read

persuade God to be gracious - are empty, meaningless, a waste of time and energy. There are no conditions, no more bills to be paid, no more obligations to be fulfilled to convince God to love. Jesus Christ has taken care of all that. What remains, Paul said, is to hear that incredible bit of news, really to hear it, to be converted by it in fact, from a person worrying about pleasing God to one who is overwhelmed by joy and because he knows that God is pleased. What remains is to hear that in a way that allows it to generate some related behavior - love, joy, peace, patience. There aren't any rules about this behavior, Paul said.

Now, in any age, it is very good news to hear that God has given you your salvation - you are safe. And as soon as these Galatian Gentiles began to appropriate it and enjoy it a bit, they were visited by teams of teachers from Jerusalem, dispatched by the church - which was strongly Jewish - to follow Paul and to tell the new Gentile believers that in order truly to be a disciple of Jesus Christ a person had first to conform to the law of Moses. When some of the new Galatian Christians, men and women with whom Paul lived and worked and came to love very much, became confused: when some tried to adapt to the dietary and Sabbath regulations and submitted to circumcision, Paul wrote a blistering letter which is angry and at times vindictive. "I wish those who were confusing you would mutilate themselves..." he wrote, and that is a polite translation of what Paul actually said he hoped these earnest people would do to themselves. The letter is magnificent: it is the cornerstone of the idea of Christian freedom. It was the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and it has spoken to the millions upon millions of Christian men and women who have heard the good news in political or economic bondage and in those circumstances have learned the meaning of freedom. It has spoken to millions of Christians living with a heavy load of personal guilt, unable ever to do enough to create for themselves a blessed sense of forgiveness, redemption. It has been salvation for many.

But there is another side to this matter, and Paul gets to it near the end of the letter. "You were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." How in the world can you be free and a servant at the same time? What does it mean to be free if you can't do what you want to do?

Some of the Galatians and their cousins over in Corinth particularly, heard the Gospel of freedom as permission to do whatever they wanted to do. "Hurray!" they said. "If God isn't going to love us any more for obeying the rules, why bother? Let's do our own thing!" And they did. In the name of Christian freedom they lived it up. Over in Corinth they drank too much communion wine and turned the sacrament of the Lord's Supper into an orgy. "Why now? God still loves us. Paul said so - they reasoned, with some logic.

Something important is missing from that argument, obviously. Freedom may be that which makes us human: it may be the differentiation between human beings who can decide what to do and animals who simply answer hormones and instincts. But raw freedom - pure freedom - the simple absence of necessity not only isn't the point in a Christian sense, it has a way of becoming anarchy, in the final analysis seems to give rise to a new kind of bondage.

As Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, now Jesus asks him three times, "Simon Peter, do you love me, more than these?" And as he denied Jesus three times now Peter professes his love, with the same increasing intensity. And three times Jesus adds the admonition: "Feed my lambs... tend my sheep...feed my sheep..."

There are at least two dynamics happening in this intense interchange. The first has to do with Peter's own spirit. Surely, after the crucifixion, following his own terrible cowardice, Peter was virtually a prisoner of his own guilt. We know a little bit about our own vulnerability and culpability here. We know what it means to set high goals and espouse noble ideals, to plan to be brave and courageous and strong, and then head for cover as soon as the going gets tough. We know what it feels like to fail to live up to our own expectations of ourselves and the guilt which results. We can, that is to say, sense more than a little of the self-inflicted remorse Peter was experiencing after the crucifixion.

"Do you love me, Peter?" What was he supposed to say to that? The truth of the matter was that he had not behaved in a way which expressed love for anyone or anything but his own life. Yet, he did love Jesus. He knew the intensity of his own soul. He loved Jesus as he had never loved anything before. And so the first dynamic here has to do with Peter, even in the midst of the pain and guilt and remorse of the moment, hearing and experiencing the steady love of Jesus for him. Jesus somehow could love people who don't appear to have done much to deserve that love. Jesus somehow could discern that which is lovable in even the most unlovable characters. Philosopher Max Sheler writes: "Love uncovers the essence of another's life and affirms every action in the direction of that essence..." Because Jesus stayed with him, even as he was backing down; because Jesus was faithful, even when he wasn't, Peter could begin to see something of value in himself, could - in the words of one commentator - "love what Jesus loved in him."

That's the first dynamic. And when it happens - when in the midst of our sense of our humanity, at its most human - our failures, foibles, our self serving posturing, we know ourselves loved by another, it is like salvation, the prophet compared to the gentle, refreshing rain of God pouring out of the heavens. (Hosea 10:12) It's no wonder Peter was in love with Jesus.

The second dynamic also is about falling in love. It, too, is compelling, but in a very different way. What Jesus was asking of Peter now was strength, courage, loyalty. Love is not ordinarily attached to those words. But the attraction Jesus had for Peter was precisely that Jesus had lived and loved in this way. His love was not an abstraction. His love - and this is so difficult for us to understand - was not an emotion. It was a lifestyle of helping, serving, healing, feeding, liberating. The dialogue between Peter and Jesus does not conclude with a mushy verbal affirmation of affective love but with the behavioral admonition, "Feed my sheep." Which is to say that the way one goes about loving Jesus is by helping with the sheep.

do my thing and you do yours and let's not get in each others way" was the new social contract a few years ago. Self discovery, self affirmation, self assertion became a plague of simple selfishness in which doing only what one wants to do looked like strength and freedom. But that badly misses something precious about our humanity, our potential as persons, and it flies squarely in the face of the only ethical wisdom we Christians have, namely the obligation, the requirement, the necessity of love.

We do not codify our morality. We do not attach conditions to God's love and make salvation dependent on the basis of the rules we have kept. "Be good and God will reward you." is the oldest but most persistent theological mistake in the book. Goodness is its own reward. God already loves you - is how it is in Christian faith, and Paul fought the battle early. The heresy is durable, however. And so we need reminding. We are saved by grace and we are free to the degree that we commit ourselves in love to the service of others.

"Love, and do as you please" is how Augustine, 4th century Bishop in North Africa, said it. As a young man he had struggled with how to reconcile what he wanted to do with what religion told him he had to do. He indulged his appetites, lived as a libertine, sank deeper and deeper into meaninglessness, returned to the faith - and saw that all he was doing was submitting to a different kind of bondage. In his Confessions he put it memorably: "Love, and Do as You Please". St. Augustine saw it clearly: Christian freedom is proscribed, hemmed in on all sides by love.

It certainly isn't easy: it surely is not permissiveness. In fact it is much more strenuous to live by the necessity to love - than simply to follow the rules.

It is not easy to know how to live as a Christian. The issues with which we must deal are difficult, and the futurists are promising that the complexity will increase. "Pro Choice - Pro Life" on the abortion question almost pales by comparison with the ethical choices future generations will make about genetic engineering, for instance. Simple rules will not be helpful.

What will be helpful is the idea of Christian freedom: a freedom that does not exist in the abstract, but which literally comes into being when combined with the discipline of obligation, loyalty, commitment, and love.

One of the wisest teachers I ever had was Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology, University of Chicago. In a book of essays published on his 75th birthday, he commented on the relationship of freedom and obligation, particularly in the context of human relations.

> "Bach produced greatness within the strict musical limits of his time: indeed the severity of the limits called forth the magnificence of the accomplishment. Just as Bach accepted limitation and discipline in musical composition, so marriage means limits. Without limitation there is no expansion...The trouble with temporary relationships is that when there is a way out, the couple deprive themselves of the deepening effect of going all the way in...

The allure of Jesus is that to think about it much is to know that his life is how God planned human life to be lived. Is there really any question any longer that he is the only person in history who understands how to live in peace? Is there any real question that until we learn of him to live together as brothers and sisters across all the lines of nation, class, race, and religion - there will be no peace? Is there any question about where he would be in our world and where his strong love would take him and how he would respond to the irony of a culture in which we who are comfortable are enjoying tax cuts and those who have nothing experience reductions in public assistance for food, shelter, health care, education? Can we, without a very creative denial, stay close to him as money is literally taken away from the poor to purchase a new genration of nuclear weapons?

The dangerous allure of Jesus is that he saw the truth and had the courage to tell the truth and live the truth. And in so doing he became a model of human life lived so fully that anyone who takes the time to learn about it and think about it will be forever haunted by it.

He was, Hans Kung wrote, the "true revolutionary." "What could be more revolutionary", the great theologian asks, than "love of enemies instead of destruction: unconditional forgiveness instead of retaliation; readiness to suffer instead of using force, blessings for peacemakers instead of hymns of hate and revenge." (On Being a Christian, p. 191)

From the earliest days of the Christian Church until today, the Gospel begins with a story about a man named Jesus. From the apostolic preaching in 35 A.D. until now, the best of the pulpit is the story of the man. And from that day beside the ocean, when Jesus met Peter and asked, "Do you love me?" - being a Christian has been a process of falling more deeply in love, and then finding that one's humanity, one's own life is miraculously enlivened and energized and enlarged by that strong love.

It is, someone said, sublimely simple. "Do you love me?...Feed my sheep." AMEN.